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ABSTRACT

Observations of 90 lessons reveal the limitations of the whole-class discussion, the dominant teaching method in elementary and secondary schools. In addition to producing a low percentage of student involvement, rarely more than 50%, teachers' questions and answer techniques do not usually stimulate critical thinking. Besides most often asking for recall rather than intepretation of facts, teachers control students' responses, signalling desired answers through intonation and reformulating answers to fit their own thinking. Even if they avoid over-translation, teachers, rather than students, do most of the cognitive work during discussions--hypothesizing, generalizing, analyzing, and synthesizing. Teachers can make whole-class discussions more effective, however, with the following practices: (1) allowing students to reflect on the material, first silently and then in small groups, before beginning a class discussion; (2) arranging seating to promote discussion; (3) encouraging students to respond to each other directly; (4) making questions as open as possible and responding to pupils' answers instead of simply evaluating them; (5) urging students to develop their answers; and (6) occasionally recording discussions to analyze their quality. (A scheme for analyzing lesson transcripts is appended.) (MM)

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Some Aspects of Classroom Discourse in English

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As far as I know, the American novelist Betsy Byars has never been a teacher, and I suspect that it is precisely this fact that has made her such a perceptive observer of what goes on in classrooms. Consider these two excerpts from her novels. First, from *The TV Kid*, we have the scene where Lennie, who is new to the class, has just recited a poem:

> 'What do you think the poet had in mind when he wrote the poem?' The teacher, interested in Lennie for the first time, crossed in front of her desk ...
>
> 'Do you think he was talking about one year passing?' the teacher went on. 'Or do you think, Lennie, that the poet was seeing his whole life as a year, that he was seeing his whole life slipping past?'
>
> 'I'm not sure.' Lennie's hand was still on his chin as if ready to stroke a long grey beard.
>
> 'Class?'
>
> '*His whole life slipping past*,' the class chorused together. They had had this teacher so long they could tell, just from the way she asked a question, what they were supposed to answer.

Then we have the following exchange from *The Cybil War*:

> 'Simon! *Simon*!'
>
> He Looked up. 'What?'
>
> 'Would you like to tell the class the meaning of the next poem?'
>
> He looked down at the blurred image of his English book. He decided to tell the truth. 'No,' he said.

The teacher in *The TV Kid* is unaware that she continually signals the required answer by her intonation, and the teacher in *The Cybil War*

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is unaware (or has been until that moment) that her politeness is a tacit invitation to dishonesty.

It has been a source of considerable puzzlement and irritation to researchers in the field that despite evidence of the limitations of whole-class discussion as a teaching method, and despite the stress on the value of exploratory talk as an aid to learning, the preferred method of English teachers remains whole-class discussion, which is usually a euphemism for question-and-answer, or recitation, as the Americans call it. One reason for the persistence of the recitation must be the enormous cultural pressure exerted when a particular teaching method has been the norm throughout the history of compulsory education, but I suggest that another reason is simply that teachers are too close to it to be aware of its defects. Because the teacher is so clearly the central person in the recitation strategy, because the pressure is always on him or her to keep the lesson going, to maintain order at the same time as 'selecting, prompting, improvising and generally orchestrating the exchange(s)' (Bullock Report, 1975, 141), it becomes impossible to draw back, as it were, and look at what is going on with a more or less impartial eye. (Contrast this with a lesson based on small-group work: more difficult to organise, perhaps, but allowing the teacher frequent opportunity to stand back and take stock of the situation.) It is this very pressure, then, that blinds the teacher to the defects of the method and makes change slower.

To begin with, the pressure of the situation commonly leads teachers to deceive themselves concerning the proportion of pupils actually involved. A few years ago I observed ninety lessons which, in whole or part, involved whole-class discussion. In follow-up interviews with teachers, I found that almost all believed that many more pupils were actively involved than was actually the case. While the number of pupils responding seldom exceeded 50%, several of the teachers clearly believed that almost every child had had a chance to speak. Secondly, the teachers in this sample commonly deceived themselves about the quality of the exchanges. They believed that their questioning techniques were encouraging critical thinking, yet an analysis of their questions revealed a different picture. Some were falling into the error of the teacher in *The TV Kid* and signalling by intonation the required answer:

> Teacher: *Some* people might say that the theme of the play (*Death of a Salesman*) is exploitation. Have we got much evidence for that?
>
> Pupils (in chorus): No.

Very commonly they asked strings of closed questions requiring factual answers, and were content with one-word or very brief answers. Here, for example, is a transcript of a lesson in which an able Year 10 class of fifteen-year-olds was involved in a teacher-led discussion of a short film. The film was screened in the period prior to morning recess; the discussion occurred in the period

immediately after recess:

1. Teacher: We've got two rather difficult films to discuss. The first one I want to talk about is the animated cartoon. I don't know the name of it - it's a French cartoon.
2. Pupil: *Shoes*.
3. Teacher: It's called *Shoes*, is it Mark? Okay, let's call it *Shoes*. Let's forget for one second what the film was about and talk about the way it was made for a second ... Now it's an animated cartoon and there are several different ways that animated cartoons are made. Can you tell me one, Jeff? One way to make animated cartoons?
4. Pupil: (inaudible)
5. Teacher: What do you mean? What kind of stuff? What do you mean by 'stuff'?
6. Pupil: Drawing.
7. Teacher: Drawing. Okay.
8. Pupil 2: They use puppets.
9. Teacher: And do they get them to move?
10. Pupil: (inaudible)
11. Teacher: So they move the puppets, do they? To get movement. Right. And other ways?
12. Pupil: They draw on the actual film.
13. Teacher: They draw on the actual film ... Okay, about the film you saw today - how do you think it was made? Fiona. Was it by drawings on a background, was it made by puppets, or was it drawn on the film?
14. Fiona: Drawn on the film.
15. Pupil: Drawn on a background.
16. Teacher: Drawn on a background. Okay. So that's the first technical thing you noticed today. Now let's talk about what the film was about. Where was it set? What was the setting? What was the character doing?
17. Pupil: In his office.
18. Teacher: And what happened to him? What was the first thing you noticed about him? What sort of actions did he go through early in the film?
19. Pupil: (inaudible) shoe box and when his boss went past he had to pretend he was working.
20. Teacher: What happened after his boss went away? What did he do with the shoes?
21. Pupil: He put them in the bin and put his new shoes on.
22. Teacher: He put them in the bin and put his new shoes on. And what happened to him as soon as he put his new shoes on?
23. Pupil: He put his foot on the ground and vibrated the whole building.
24. Teacher: He was really noisy. And what was the reaction of the other workers? Cathy. And what did all the other people do when he made all this noise with his brand new shoes?
25. Cathy: Came into his office.
26. Teacher: Do you think they were annoyed or do you think they were happy?

27. Cathy: Annoyed.
28. Teacher: So it was noisy and the other people he was working with became annoyed. So what did he decide to do?
29. Pupil: Tried to get his old shoes back.
30. Teacher: And what had happened to his old shoes?
31. Pupil: (inaudible)
32. Teacher: The cleaner came and took them away. So what did he decide to do after that? Cathy?
33. Cathy: Buy some new ones.
34. Teacher: Buy some new ones. And what did he do? How did he go about buying some new shoes? (inaudible response)
35. Teacher: Okay - a van went past and the van was making what sort of music?
36. Pupil: Marching music.
37. Teacher: Marching music. And what did he do?
38. Pupil: Marched.
39. Teacher: Marched along - fitted in with the noise. And then he got to the shoe shop and what kind of shoe did he buy?
40. Pupil: Blue ones.
41. Teacher: He bought new blue ones. Okay. So he bought two pairs of shoes. And what happened to his new blue shoes?
42. Pupil: (inaudible)
43. Teacher: Did they make any noise when he walked?
44. Pupils: No.
45. Pupil: They made the music stop.
46. Teacher: They made the music stop. Okay, so what finally happened to this little character and all the trouble with his shoes?
47. Pupil: He disappeared.
48. Teacher: He disappeared too. Right. So everything disappeared in the end. Now just think carefully... Did the person who made the film make it just to amuse himself?
49. Pupil: Yes.
50. Teacher: ... or do you think there was message in it?
51. Pupil: Some message ... (inaudible)
52. Teacher: I suppose that may be a possibility but maybe there's something deeper.
53. Pupil: (inaudible)
54. Teacher: You think because he was greedy about his shoes he caused all this trouble. What do you think, Brett?
55. Brett: (inaudible) noise.
56. Teacher: You think it's a film about noise. That's a possibility too. Anyone got any other? Any ideas? Graham, any ideas? Michael? All right, we've got Jeff's suggestion that his first pair of shoes were perfectly good and yet he was greedy and wanted a new pair of shoes and that's what caused him all the trouble. Brett suggests that it's something to do with noises. He bought his new shoes and they were noisy and all the people were

unhappy about it so he felt guilty ... so he bought the pair of blue ones and they were so quiet ... could you say that his new shoes were so quiet that he became insignificant and nobody noticed him anymore?

57. Pupils: Yeah.

58. Teacher: That's why he disappeared. He didn't disappear in reality ... in a poetic sense his new shoes were so quiet that he became insignificant and nobody noticed him anymore. Could you say that?

59. Pupils: Yeah.

60. Teacher: You could ... does anyone disagree with that idea? Okay, what was the second film called?

(Watson, 1980)

It is significant that of the sixty items that constitute the 'discussion' of this film, thirteen are concerned with having the pupils recall the three ways in which animated cartoons can be made (nos 3-15), thirty-two with having the pupils recall the action which they have witnessed only half an hour before (nos 16-47), and twelve (nos 48-59) with a consideration of the theme of the film. It is only in this third section that any open questions occur, and it could easily be argued that these are really pseudo-questions since the teacher appears intent on imposing his own view of the film on the pupils. (To be fair to him, he does give some weight to the pupils' suggestions in his summing up (no 56). In this third section, too, two of the twelve items are simply approval noises made by the pupils when the teacher seeks confirmation for his interpretation. The amount of active involvement by the pupils in the problem of interpretation posed by the film is therefore very small indeed: the teacher has confined most of the conversation to simple recall of facts.

In a sub-sample of thirty of the ninety lessons referred to earlier, it was found that of 605 questions asked, only 170 could be classified as 'open' (i.e. those which allow a range of responses and in general give more scope for thinking), and 97 of these occurred in five of the lessons. As far as the other 25 lessons were concerned, the percentage of open questions asked was only 16% of the total. But as Edwards and Furlong (1978,30) have pointed out, it is what teachers do *after* a pupil has replied that makes classroom questioning so distinctive. Each reply is normally followed by a comment from the teacher. This comment usually consists of a judgement such as 'good' or 'no, that's wrong', followed by a statement in which the pupil's reply is repeated or reformulated in some way. My colleague Bob Young and I have given some attention to the reformulations occurring in English lessons. Our study has convinced us that many teachers quite unconsciously so alter pupil responses in order to fit their own frames of reference that discussion is transformed into something perilously close to indoctrination. Further, there is a tendency to treat pupil responses as deficient in some way. In many classrooms, pupil discourse is

constantly transformed to such an extent that it is reasonable to say that it is *replaced* by teacher discourse.

A range of functions may be identified in teacher reformulations: repeating a pupil response so that everyone may hear; repeating it with positive approval because it is what the teacher wants; partial repetition of those parts the teacher wants to make use of; adding to, generalising from, replacing terminology in, and otherwise transforming the pupil utterance. To borrow some terminology from Heritage's analysis of news interviews (Heritage, 1977) some of these reformulations are 'soft' (functioning, for example, simply to demonstrate understanding or to clarify a point), and some are 'hard' (drawing, perhaps, unjustified inferences, or reflecting in some way upon the speaker). In 'hard' reformulations the speaker usually has no recourse. It is rare indeed in a classroom to hear a pupil say, 'Now hold on, sir! You've got it wrong. I didn't say that'.

Let us look at some of these 'harder' degrees of transformation:

Example A

Teacher: What about if you're the speaker in the discussion? You're the one everyone's listening to. What sort of rules must you follow?

Pupil: Sometimes you've got to be careful what you say about people.

Teacher: All right, you've got to think about what you're going to say.

Example B

Teacher: How does Smith (in Leon Garfield's novel *Smith*) feel about the document?

Pupil: He's frustrated because he can't read it.

Teacher: His curiosity is aroused because he realises that it is the reason why Mr Field was murdered.

Example C

Pupil: I think the road's too thin - too small.

Teacher: Yes, the road is, perhaps, not wide enough. The road is narrow.

In the first two examples the teacher seems to be so enclosed within

her own frame of reference that she fails to see that another, equally valid, point is being made. Thus in Example A it appears that the teacher is unconsciously distorting the pupil's reply to fit her frame of reference; in Example B it would appear that she hasn't even heard what the pupil has said. To return to Example A for a moment, the very next exchange exhibits a similar transformation:

Teacher: All right ... and to find out what each other thinks about things and perhaps come to a ...

Pupil: Agreement.

Teacher: Decision about something.

(This exchange is not as trivial as it may seem. An agreement emphasises the relationship between people, while a decision is something which people may reach in common but which is, as it were, external to their relationship, more impersonal.) Example C has, like the 'agreement-decision' substitution, the effect of downgrading the pupil's contribution, of suggesting that it is deficient in some way. All three reinforce the notion that what is called whole-class discussion is simply a game of 'guess what the teacher's thinking'; that the rewards lie in using the words the teacher has in mind rather than in offering ideas for consideration.

Even where the pitfalls of 'hard' reformulation are avoided, it is the teacher rather than the pupils who is most often doing the cognitive work of the lesson - hypothesising, generalising, analysing, synthesising.

Example D (From a discussion of a *Z Cars* TV script.)

Pupil: Well, it's sort of a build up so that you can understand that what happens at the end ... like if you hadn't read the rest of the play you wouldn't know what was going on.

Teacher: Well, then, you are suggesting, are you, it's got something to do ... with bringing to our notice that the police, or Lynch in particular ... was there on the spot and the gloves were there as proof that he had been in Regan's room, and the fact that Lynch was more worried about the gloves than poor old Regan ... suggests something else, that perhaps the dent in the motor car is also suggesting ... the fact that these ordinary little details are there when all the time when we're worried about these little things something terrible is happening, in other words a man is taking his own life.

Part of the problem, I would suggest, is that in the whole-class

situation the teacher is so anxious to keep the discussion moving, to keep everyone attentive, that s/he feels unable to pause to allow pupils to develop their ideas, to indulge in that exploratory talk that seems so important a part of learning. In only half of the sub-sample of 30 lessons referred to earlier were there instances of pupils being encouraged to expand on their replies, and only about one-third of the teachers seemed to be pursuing this as a conscious strategy.

Can whole-class discussion be made more effective? I think that it can. By all means let us continue to stress the value of other methods, notably small-group talk and activity, but let us also give some attention to improving a teaching method that is so much a part of our culture that it continues to be used no matter how often its defects are highlighted. Here are a few suggestions for lifting the quality of whole-class discussions*:

1. After the material for discussion - poem, excerpt from a novel, article from a newspaper, etc. - has been presented, allow the pupils a few minutes to reflect on the material before requiring them to voice a response.

2. Place the pupils in groups for ten or fifteen minutes before the material is discussed by the class as a whole. This gives them an opportunity to try out their ideas in a non-threatening situation, to begin the process of exploration and clarification that will be continued when the whole class comes together. Regular small-group discussion of this kind trains them to listen closely to one another (something that is often missing in whole-class discussions) and allows them to enter whole-class discussion feeling more confident of their grasp of the material. When this procedure is followed, the length and quality of pupils' responses increase markedly.

3. Adopt a seating arrangement that is conducive to discussion. Ideally, pupils should be arranged in a circle. If this is not possible, choose an arrangement that brings as many as possible face to face.

4. Gradually relax your control of discussion so that pupils feel free to respond to one another directly rather than wait for you to pass judgement on each response. Here is an excerpt from a discussion of Seamus Heaney's poem *The Play Way*:

   Teacher: Well, what is there about (the classroom depicted in the poem) that is normal? Miriam, you look as if you are very aware of it.

   Pupil 1: It's normal in that it's something that a teacher is trying to give the class an idea ... which in a subject like English is more likely

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* These suggestions are also included in Watson, Ken, 'Improving Whole-Class Discussion', in Walshe, R.D., Jensen, Dot, and Moore, Tony (eds), *Teaching Literature*, Sydney, E.T.A./P.E.T.A., 1983.

to be ... different ... well, not different ... but trying to get the class to express themselves and to (inaudible)

Pupil 2: Is this musical English, or ...

Pupil 3: It's musical appreciation ...

Pupil 4: No, it's a stimulus for writing ...

Pupil 5: We used to do something like that in primary school ...

Pupil 3: I thought the poem was about primary school ...

Teacher: You thought the poem was about primary school?

5. Try to make your questions as open as possible (i.e., allowing for a range of responses). Listen carefully to pupils' answers and respond to those answers instead of simply evaluating them:

Pupil: Well (in lower primary school) one day you hate a bloke, the next day you don't. And in the First Form (Year 7) anger seems to be a lot more drawn out.

Teacher: Yes ... If you have a fight with a bloke very often it takes a long time before you're ever ... close to him again and you're never as close as you were before.

6. Encourage pupils to develop their answers:

Pupil: I reckon it's a theme based on the policeman's conscience.

Teacher: Conscience?

Pupil: Yes, when the guy gasses himself ... he's poured that cup of tea for the policeman ... and the policeman ... gets really upset about it ... and they're talking about ... ah ... how people, you know, react to different things.

Teacher: When you say the policeman gets really upset about it, what do you mean?

7. When discussing literature, follow the advice of the Bullock Report to stand alongside the pupils in the process of exploration, avoiding using the text as a repository of answers to which you alone possess the key. (Bullock Report, 1975, 131)

8. Occasionally monitor your own performance by tape-recording the lesson. A scheme for analysing lesson transcripts - one that owes much to the work of Douglas Barnes - is given in the Appendix.

In the past decade there have been some notable shifts in teaching practice in the direction of providing more opportunities for pupils to engage in exploratory talk in non-threatening situations. But whole-class discussion remains the dominant teaching method, and the time has surely arrived for a concerted effort to be made to improve the quality of teaching in the whole-class situation.

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APPENDIX*

Analysing Transcripts of English Lessons

The fondness of English teachers for whole-class discussion means that a large proportion of English lessons can be analysed by means of transcripts. When transcripts are being studied, three basic questions need to be asked:

1. Are the pupils being given opportunity to express their thoughts and their feelings?

2. Is the teacher's reception of pupils' responses such as to make them feel that their contributions are valued?

3. Who is doing the 'cognitive work' of the lesson (hypothesising, generalising, analysing, synthesising) - the teacher or the pupils?

The answers to these questions can be gained by looking closely at:

1. *The Teacher's Questioning*

   a. Are most of the teacher's questions *open* (i.e. questions which allow a range of responses and in general give more scope for thinking) or are they *closed* questions (i.e. those for which only one answer, usually factual, is possible)?

   b. Does the teacher ask pseudo-questions (i.e. questions which appear to be open but for which the teacher's reception of answers shows that s/he will accept only one reply)?

   c. Does the teacher elicit (and build on) the experience and understanding the pupils bring to the classroom?

2. *The Pupils' Responses*

   Are the pupils' responses typically short, or are they encouraged to develop their replies? Is there any evidence that they are encouraged to use exploratory talk - to talk their way into understanding?

3. *The Teacher's Reception of Pupils' Responses*

   Is the teacher concerned chiefly to evaluate replies (right/wrong; good/bad) or does s/he *respond* to what has been said? Does s/he encourage pupils to expand on their replies?

* From Watson, Ken, *English Teaching in Perspective*, Sydney, St Clair Press, 1981, 77-78.

Do the teacher's comments on pupils' replies function as a means of clarifying meanings and increasing understanding, or do they distort pupils' contributions in order to fit the teacher's frame of reference? Are they simply repetitions of what the pupils have said?

4. *The Degree of Conversational Control Exerted by the Teacher*

Is there a demand that all pupil responses be funnelled through the teacher, or are pupils encouraged to respond directly to one another?

Are pupils given the opportunity to ask their own questions? Are they free to open up new areas of discussion?

Where the transcripts of small-group discussion are being examined, the following are some of the questions that need to be asked:

1. How is the talk being managed? Is it based on democratic negotiation, or is one member of the group 'playing teacher'? Is there evidence that the group is functioning in a mutually supportive way?

2. Is there evidence that members of the group are listening attentively to one another?

3. Is there evidence of collaborative learning - of pupils working together to develop and clarify their understanding?

4. Does the group cope satisfactorily with differences of opinion?

5. Do the members of the group allow one another to bring personal experience to bear on what is being discussed?

6. Are there signs that the group has developed/is developing the skills of hypothsising, marshalling evidence, evaluating evidence?

7. Is there evidence that members of the group are developing/have developed the ability to remain tentative and tolerate uncertainty for longish periods?

-o-

Note: In preparing this, I have drawn freely on the work of Douglas Barnes, especially his *From Communication to Curriculum*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin, 1976.